

Overview of Natural Areas of the Lower Eno River

The Eno River is the largest stream draining Orange County. Along with New Hope Creek and Morgan Creek, it is one of the three major streams along which this inventory has identified a large proportion of the county's natural areas. As a major waterway, with some of the steepest slopes and greatest amount of topographic variation in the county, the Eno is one of the corridors most deserving of protection.

The boundaries of the Eno River State Park encompass several, but not all, of the significant sites along the Eno River. This inventory identifies four natural areas all or partially within Eno River State Park (E10 - E13). A large part of the natural area associated with Occoneechee Mountain (E07) is also protected and managed by the State. Ranging from bottomland to dry upland forest, these areas encompass the best sites that occur from the park's upstream boundary to the Durham County line.

The upstream boundary of this following series of natural areas along the lower Eno begins downstream from Hillsborough at the confluence with Cates Creek. Extensive bottomland forests and slopes dominated by chestnut oak occur here (E10), along with bluffs with mountain laurel and galax, which offer scenic views of the surrounding area. Several seeps here are breeding habitat for the gray petaltail [dragonfly], and the entire stretch of river for these several miles is documented habitat for the river otter.

Along the portion of the river that flows west to east, several slopes (E11) offer habitat for regionally rare plant species such as ginseng, yellow lady's slipper, monkshood, showy orchis, and maidenhair fern. The upland area (E11) south of the large bend of the river is a large undeveloped forest with upland habitats that, prior to being purchased by the State in late 2003, was not well represented within the boundaries of the state park. Two of the county's three upland depressions are also found here.

Several other sites within the Eno River State Park have outstanding natural features. At the confluence of the Eno River and Buckwater Creek (E11), the county's best upland post oak forest is found, along with one of the three best south-facing bluffs. The bottomlands along Buckwater Creek are one of the richest of such sites in the county. The riparian forest along the river between here and Cates Ford (E11) is in excellent condition. Just downstream of Pleasant Green Road, a steep rhododendron bluff (E12) is habitat for the easternmost population of mountain spleenwort known from North Carolina. Farther downstream (E13), another bluff supports a Virginia pine – heath community, one of only two such sites in the county.